

Shoshannah Brombacher, PhD

Yosef and his brothers. Three artistic interpretations.

It is not enough that an artist has good skills handling his or her tools, like brushes, chisels, a weaving-loom, clay, or whatever medium they work with, and it's not enough that they are good at making compositions or combine colors and the like,



**Yosef and his
brothers.**
**Shoshannah
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*Pastel, pencil and
ink on paper;*
16.5x23.6 inches,
Berlin 2024

though this is, of course, indispensable for good art. Artists interpret the story they are displaying. There is no right or wrong, your interpretation, just like the one of the person seeing your art, is unique. But some interpretations are more appealing than others. It's not always easy to understand a story. It requires not only background knowledge, but also, in a sense, being able to identify with the story, its protagonists, or parts of it, and psychological insight.

Here is an example of three ways to visually interpret the famous story of Yosef revealing his true identity to his long lost brothers after they came down to Egypt to buy grain.

Bereshit, chapter 45, describes how Yosef invites his brothers to his house. This is unusual, because we may safely assume that Egyptian officials generally did not or rarely invite the foreign traders who traveled to Egypt to buy or beg for grain during the great famine. Besides, Egyptians despised nomads and shepherding, which was Yosef's brothers' lifestyle.

These, in turn, were already wary of Yosef, whom they only knew as the high ranking aloof Egyptian official selling them grain. He had asked them (too) many questions during a former visit and even had kept one of the brothers as a hostage. This had forced them to bring their youngest brother Benjamin with them on their next trip despite their protests that this one, the youngest brother, had to stay with their old father Yaakov, or else he would die of grief.

Now imagine their surprise, when Yosef revealed that he was, in fact, their own long lost brother, the one they had callously thrown into a dry well and, when he did not die, sold into slavery. The one they probably assumed to be dead by now. Most slaves had a short lifespan.

The brothers panicked. They were completely in Yosef's power. Would he take revenge, kill them or enslave them? Would their old father Yaakov ever see them back?



In the first drawing, Yosef looks tense and uneasy but determined. He is beardless, as the Egyptian customs required, and his head shaven, he is not wearing an Egyptian wig or head-covering here. His clothes are made of fine expensive linen, he has a bejeweled necklace, heavy golden earrings, and a scarab to indicate his high rank. The bearded brothers are

wearing simple long woolen shepherd tunics. They look primitive and unkempt in Yosef's refined environment, his luxurious house with pillars topped with lotus-shaped capitals. The faces of the brothers express different emotions, from surprise, bewilderment and guilt to deep fear and anxiety, utter grief and depression.

This is the exact moment before Josphe embraced all of them and told them not to be afraid. The colors express their raw emotions of that moment, bright red and flakes of yellow, with Benjamin (on the right side), in blue, he is calmer. This is one of the most powerful moments in the family tragedy that ultimately ended well.

Now look at the second drawing. Here, the focus is more on Yosef than on his brothers. Josphe stretches out his arms in a welcoming and forgiving gesture to his



Yosef and his brothers. Shoshannah Brombacher

Pastel, pencil and ink on paper, 18 x 24 inches, Brooklyn 2008

distraught and discombobulated brothers. Josphe wants to embrace the family he hasn't had for a long time. If he will ever forget what happened is a different question, of course. His expression is benign, as opposed to the contorted faces of his brothers.



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In the third drawing, Yosef has fallen victim to deep emotions and despair. He towers over the brothers, not for power, but because he is completely overwhelmed and on the verge of collapse. The Torah text states that he had to withdraw earlier to his inner chamber, so his household would not see him weeping.

His naked shaven head, like in the first drawing, expresses his vulnerability towards the brothers. He is a high Egyptian government official by now, only second in rank to Pharaoh himself, but at the same time he is that long lost brother of a shepherd tribe, whose multicolored coat was ripped up by his jealous brothers before he was sold for money as a slave to a traveling caravan that would bring him to Egypt. This does something to one's confidence. All those years away from his family he missed his father, his former life, his beloved brother Benjamin, who had the same mother as he had, unlike his other brothers. They were all sons of Yaakov. Unbeknownst to the brothers, Yosef understood everything they said to each other in their and his own native tongue. He probably had not heard that tribal language for decades. He must have mulled over his fate with nobody to talk about it, and now he stood eye to eye with his mean family and his beloved brother Benjamin, and he knew that his beloved father was very old and still alive.

In Egypt, he had survived being thrown into prison after false accusations and, in a weird twist of fate, was elevated to his high rank. It's mind boggling. There are a hundred more possible interpretations of this story, of course. I offer here my own three. And I want to encourage my fellow artists to dive into the depth of a theme and make multiple works about it, put them next to each other, and then make a few more. Which will be interpreted in turn by the viewer of the art. There is no end.

Shoshannah Brombacher, Berlin, February 2024